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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest reports on the educational aspirations of rural youth compared with students living in urban and suburban areas. Research indicates that in comparison to urban youth, rural young people felt their parents were much more supportive of their taking full-time jobs, attending trade schools, or entering the military rather than attending college. These lower educational aspirations accompanied lower values for making a lot of money, and higher values for simply making good incomes, having secure jobs, and maintaining friendships. The circumstances that contribute to lower educational aspirations among rural youth include: (1) the strong relationship between socioeconomic status and educational outcomes, i.e., students who come from low-income circumstances have lower educational aspirations than do their more economically advantaged peers; (2) a poverty rate that is higher in rural America than elsewhere; (3) the low educational level of rural parents which tends to influence the educational aspirations of their children; and (4) the lack of managerial and technical jobs requiring college degrees since such jobs have shifted increasingly to urban areas. Rural students cited economic and personal reasons more frequently than their urban and suburban counterparts for dropping out of high school. This report offers recommendations for schools, communities, parents, and policy makers for working together to raise the aspirations of rural youth. (LP)

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Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools

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EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS OF STUDENTS IN RURAL AMERICA

by Toni Haas

January 1992

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Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools January 1992

What Can I Become
Educational Aspirations of Students in Rural America

by Toni Haas

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ASPIRATIONS ARE STRONG DESIRES to reach something high or great. Young people's aspirations guide what students learn in school, how they prepare for adult life, and what they eventually do (Walberg, 1989). This Digest reports on educational aspirations of rural youth compared with students living elsewhere, and suggests ways communities can work together to raise the sights of their young people.

Understanding aspirations

Aspirations reflect individuals' ideas of their "possible selves," what they would like to become, what they might become, and what they do *not* wish to become (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Realizing aspirations requires the investment of time, energy, and resources—both from the young person and from others (Sherwood, 1989). The extent to which communities mobilize such support bears on the quality of life—both among students and among adults. A similar observation applies to realizing career or employment aspirations. In short, conditions in the community interact with the imaginations of students as they realize their aspirations.

What are current aspirations?

During the last two decades, several studies have reported changing goals and aspirations of American youth (Walberg, 1989):

- 50 percent of America's teenagers intend to go to college, a quarter intend to work and to attend college part-time, and about 10 percent intend to work full-time after graduation;
- 81 percent think it is very important to be successful in work;
- 76 percent think having strong friendships is very important;
- 68 percent think it is very important to provide children with opportunities; and
- 23 percent think it is important to have lots of money.

In an analysis of data gathered in the longitudinal survey, High School and Beyond (HSB), Cobb, McIntire, and Pratt (1989) reported that, in comparison to urban young people, *rural* young people felt their parents were much more supportive of their taking full-time jobs, attending trade schools, or entering the military rather than attending college. These lower educational aspirations accompanied lower values for making a lot of money, and higher values for simply making good incomes, having secure jobs, and maintaining friendships.

Aspirations, schooling outcomes, and poverty

Several circumstances make rural students vulnerable to poor schooling outcomes and lower educational aspirations. First, the relationship between socioeconomic status and educational outcomes has been clearly documented in the educational and psychological literature. The influence of this relationship outweighs the influence of school location (rural, suburban, or urban) or school size (Marion, Mirochnik, McCaul, & McIntire, 1991; Center for Research and Evaluation, 1991). Wherever they live or go to school, students who come from low-income circumstances have lower educational aspirations than do their more economically advantaged peers.

Second, the poverty rate is higher in rural America than it is elsewhere. Further, rural families with two people working are falling into poverty at a very high rate (O'Hare, 1988). The combination of rising tuition rates and falling family incomes may make attending college an unrealistic choice for many rural students.

A third circumstance that influences the aspirations of rural students is the education level of parents. Here, too, rural students suffer an early disadvantage. Seniors attending schools in metropolitan areas are 1.5 times more likely to have a parent with at least a bachelor's degree than non-metropolitan students (Pollard & O'Hare, 1990). This circumstance is unlikely to change, since the students who stay in rural America to become parents and raise families differ from those rural young people who leave. As a group, those who stay have the *lowest* educational aspirations of America's young people, and they tend to earn less than those who leave (Cobb, McIntire, & Pratt, 1990).

Higher education, and the higher earning potential it represents, may be the magnet that draws many young people out of rural areas. But the lack of quality jobs keeps them away. In the past 25 years, managerial and technical jobs requiring college degrees have shifted increasingly to urban locations (McGranahan, 1988).

Low aspirations and dropping out of school

The desire to go to college represents only one type of aspiration. Another is the value students place simply on finishing high school.

In an analysis of the High School and Beyond data, McCaul (1989) found that rural dropouts, like dropouts from urban and suburban schools, generally made lower grades and scored lower on achievement tests than their peers who graduated. Rural dropouts also showed signs of low self-esteem and lacked a sense of control over their own lives compared with peers who stayed in school. Like their suburban and urban counterparts, rural youth reported that poor grades and the feeling that "school was not for me" were the main reasons they left school early.

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Reasons rural students cited *more frequently* than their urban and suburban counterparts were *economic* (someone offered me a job) and *personal* (pregnancy, marriage, disability, illness, or an inability to get along with teachers).

McCaul also found that a higher proportion of rural minority students dropped out than rural white students, especially among Hispanics. Almost half of rural dropouts were from the bottom quartile of socioeconomic status.

Raising aspirations

A quarter of the country's students attend rural schools. If we are not going to squander the resource represented by this significant group of young people, the schools, the community, and the nation must work together to raise aspirations. A few examples of what can be done follow:

- Low grades and low achievement can lead to a sense that "school isn't for me." Elementary schools need to provide all students with the tools necessary for success. These include a firm grounding in basic content, in learning to learn, and in higher-order thinking strategies.
- Secondary schools need more relevant curricula so that students answer for themselves the question, "Why do I have to know this?" The secondary school curriculum should stress the kinds of skills adults need, for example, working cooperatively and problem-solving.
- Schools also should organize to address the social and emotional needs of students. Matching small groups of students with a caring adult can provide students the coaching they need to jump all the hurdles that lie between them and high school graduation.
- Parents can raise their own expectations for their children's academic achievement. They should insist that teachers and students raise their expectations as well. Parents can also express their support for the value of education and help the schools celebrate successes.
- The community can signal its commitment to education by providing scholarships, recognizing academic as well as athletic prowess, helping to improve local schools, creating apprenticeship and work/study opportunities, and developing venture capital for young entrepreneurs.
- School board members can revise the mission of the district so that the schools' goal is not only to prepare students to leave, but also to empower them to stay in rural areas.
- Employers can refuse full-time employment to people of school age and support part-time employees in their efforts to finish school.
- Communities, counties, states, and Congress can create economic and technological development policies that encourage diversification of the rural economy.

If manipulating symbols instead of objects makes knowledge central to the economy of the future, then young people living in the country need practice manipulating symbols. They also need access to databases, experience working together to solve problems, and jobs to use those skills locally.

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